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ABSTRACT

The Appalachian "Tale of Red Emmy" presented in the novel "Oral History" by Lee Smith (1983), reveals both an Irish origin and an American transformation. Granny Younger, one of Smith's narrators, tells of a curse visited on four generations of the Cantrell family after Almarine Cantrell chanced upon the witch Red Emmy in the wilds of the Appalachian Mountains, lay with her, and rejected her because she was a witch. Irish or Celtic motifs found in the tale include the journey to an Otherworld; a bird as guide on the journey; fairy-like characteristics of Red Emmy; a body of water with a girl bathing; a color scheme of red, white, and black in the witch's (fairy's) description; Red Emmy's disappearance when Almarine looks away; Almarine's bewitched lovesickness; the witch overpowered by the sign of the cross; the curse of a scorned witch (fairy); connections between the witch and lower animals; and Almarine's resemblance to the Irish folk hero Finn Machumail. American influences are seen in the tale's setting, Granny's statement that this a "true" story, and Red Emmy's intimacy with the Devil. Although written by a modern Appalachian novelist trying to capture the essence of Appalachian people 80 years ago, this tale blends ancient Irish traditions with distinctly American traits. Of Scotch-Irish ancestry, Lee Smith herself was unaware of the Irishness of this tale. This paper includes Smith's responses to a questionnaire on her cultural background and education. (SV)

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The Tale of Red Emmy: An Irish Witch in Appalachia

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The Tale of Red Emmy, presented in the novel, Or History, written by Lee Smith and published in 1983 shows both its Irish origin and its American transformation. Granny Younger, one of several of Smith's narrators, tells what happened when Almarine Cantrell chanced upon Red Emmy the witch in the wilds of the Appalachian Mountains and the subsequent consequences of his having lain with her and then rejecting her, simply because she was a witch. These difficulties do not end with the death of Almarine's young wife and small son, but are felt as far away as the fourth generation of the Cantrell family. Granny's tale ennumerates the how and why of this family curse, and begins the tale proper with Almarine setting out on a journey.

The tale shows its Irish roots in several ways. In the book, European Folktales in America, Reidar Christeansen makes note that it is an American trait of folktales for the teller to present the tale as "true." In the notes to chapter four of the book, Christiansen quotes from Vance Randolph's work, Who Blowed Up the Churchhouse? Randolph states that the American white storytelling tradition has a strong tendency to tell "true" stories (Randolph in Christiansen, p.82). Granny Younger takes pains to remember and accurately relate the facts of Almarine Cantrell's history. Her voice is so strong, there are few who would question the veracity of her tale, but tale it is.

Granny's tale shares several motifs with its European

antecedents. Because of Granny's descriptive narration, the motif of Journey is quite evident. That the Journey is to an Otherworld is known by Granny's verbal clues. Granny places Almarine on the "wild side of Snowman (mountain)...Nobody much lives over there" (Smith, p.32) and the funny looking rocks can't be found anyplace else. Those white rocks bounce the sunlight into Almarine's eyes so that it appears to be snowing to Almarine and he begins to feel lightheaded (p.33). The water of this place tastes like no other and it sets Almarine's hands and feet to tingling when he takes a drink (p. 34), not to mention the fact that a path opened up where no path had been before and that the path disappears after Almarine's little adventure.

Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk Literature cites many examples of tales with a motif of paths along which Journeys are made(p.572), but a path to an Otherworld is only cited in one source, Tom Peete Cross' Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature. In this index, Cross cites numerous sources which have folktales employing this same motif (p.227).

The second motif employed in Granny's tale is in the person of Almarine's guide. This redbird is not an ordinary redbird, which can be seen by the way in which Duck, Almarine's dog, refuses to sic 'im on command; he growls and all the hair stands up along his back, and he hightails it away from there (Smith, p.33). The bird then lures Almarine

along a new path to his pre-ordained destination. Again,a consultation of the Thompson Index, volume one, page 386, leads back to the Cross Index, which lists ten sources for tales in which a bird or birds show the way. Most of these sources are scholarly articles dealing with folklore and Early Irish Literature.

When Almarine has followed the bird to a pool, along a path he had never seen before though he knew these mountains well, he is dazzled by the sight of a half-naked woman bathing beside a pool. Granny would have it that Red Emmy, the woman at the pool, is a witch. Stith Thompson points out, in his book, The Folktale, that witches "belong to the world of trolls and fairies" and can be "beautiful and attractive women enticing lovers" (p.251). George Gomme points out that there is a close inter-relationship between fairy and witch beliefs (p.56) and this is an important point when considering the character of Red Emmy. Is she the witch Granny Younger insists on, or is she a fairy, transplanted to the new world and much put upon? The reason this distinction should be considered is related to the motifs of water barriers to Otherworlds (or fairy worlds), which Cross cites in seven sources (and Thompson cites only Cross), and the act of a fairy bathing, in which act Almarine has surprised Red Emmy. A fairy bathing is a motif Cross indexes in five sources.

In one of those sources, Myth and Folklore of Ireland by

Jeremiah Curin, published in Boston in 1900, the tale cited stipulates that three daughters of the Giant of Loch Lein were bathing. One has a blue Lily, one a white Lily and one a yellow Lily. The king of Erin's (Ireland's) son, who had been so instructed, stole the clothes of Yellow Lily and gave them back to her after her sisters had left (p.38-39). It is interesting to note that, while Almarine did not steal Red Emmy's clothes while she was bathing, he has just plucked "a little yaller flower that Almarine had not seed the likes of before" (Smith, p.34). A closely related motif, that of the Hero Finds the Maiden at a Well, Fountain or River is cited by Cross in another seven sources.

Thompson states, in his book, The Folktale, that in the case of the hero and the supernatural wife, the hero usually comes to a body of water and sees a girl or girls bathing (p.88). He further states that the other world is across a body of water and that the Celtic tradition has been particularly interested in terrestial other worlds lying across mountains or on distant islands (p.147).

Thompson states that folktales exist in time and space and are affected by the nature of the land where they are current (p.13). The mountains of Granny's tale are of course necessary in the Appalachian setting of her tale. Also, it is just past Christmastime, "coming spring" when Almarine starts his Journey. "It was a cold, cold day with a pale bright sun and the ground still frozen..." (Smith, p.32), so

Granny's variations on the fairy bathing motif are quite natural. Red Emmy is half-clothed and dipping at the edge of the pool, rather than completely naked and totally immersed.

The physical description of Red Emmy supplied by Granny Younger paints the picture of a beautiful woman with "the reddest red (hair), a red so dark it was nigh to purple" (Smith,p.35). Of the skin of her back, which Almarine sees first, Granny says it was "the whitest white Almarine ever seed" (p.34). "Her eyes was as black as night" and "her mouth was as red as a cut on her face and the color flamed out in her cheeks" (p.35). The Cross Index indicates that the color scheme of white, red, and black are "usually applied to the cheeks, skin and hair of a girl's lover" (p.529). Red Emmy's specifications seem to borrow quite a bit, but change to suit the storyteller. Her hair is red instead of black, but her skin is the whitest white and the color red flames up in her cheeks. Her eyes are black, while the color of the suitor's eyes is not indicated in the Cross Index.

After Almarine has taken in the sight of Red Emmy and has declared his "aim to take you (Red Emmy) home" (Smith, p.35), he falls for the ruse used by fairies, witches, elves and other fabulous folk the world over. When Red Emmy asks him to turn his look away from her, Almarine politely complies, and Red Emmy disappears. One has only to hear of Almarine's reaction in Granny's tale to know that poor

Almarine is "took sick." He "screams like a painter and plunges ahead...he runs off to the left...to the right. He runs all over the place a-hollering...He has forgot everything he knowed near about, except for that Redheaded Emmy." (Smith,p.36) A man bewitched with lovesickness is not unknown in folktales. The Cross Index lists ten sources with tales which describe the plight of the poor man. As Granny says, "...Almarine was bewitched" (p.41), and later, "I was talking to a man bewitched" (p.46).

Although Almarine is never given any tasks to fulfill in order to win Red Emmy, Granny Younger is at least aware of the Task motif when she states "they was never a young man yet who don't want to go out...do **something** to earn his right to what is there...he don't think he can ask, nor take, without earning it" (p.36). The task motif is very common in the folktale (Thompson,Motif-Index,v.6,p.781), with the hero usually being asked to complete three tasks, each more difficult than the last, in order to win his prize. However, Almarine is rewarded for persistence. "Almarine searched and searched, and searched and searched all over Snowman Mountain. He tried and tried to find that path again...that path and the little pool, but it was like it had plumb disappeared...It was like it was all in his mind" (Smith,p.38).

Almarine does come upon Red Emmy suddenly one evening. She is "a-cooking out over a fire" (p.38) and he hears her

answer to his question as if she were at a distance. The aural quality, the cave setting and the smoky atmosphere all lend a tone of otherworldness to the meeting. True to type, however, Almarine is not allowed to claim his prize. Before he can get close to her, "her daddy come running all wild-haired outen the cave ...and fired a pistol at Almarine's head...so he was forced to leave." (p.38-39)

Almarine loses this time, but not long after he has found her at the cave, Red Emmy shows up at Almarine's bedside. The reader is informed by Granny Younger that Red Emmy has freed herself of her father, whether through his accidental death or by her deliberate murder. This point is never cleared up, but Granny insists that "you know in your own heart she kilt him. Kilt him for Almarine" (Smith,p.39). If that is the case, it is not the first time a woman has killed for her lover. At this point in the tale, another motif is introduced, that of the Fairy Lover. The Cross Index, under this heading, lists seven sources. A closely related motif, headed Fairy Visits Mortal and Becomes his Mistress, lists another five sources. This second motif could be applied in that Almarine and Red Emmy never marry, and she comes to Almarine, at midnight, in the light of the moon.

The happenings which Granny describes next only serve to illustrate the extent to which Almarine is bewitched. Granny alludes to the "fact" that "A witch will ride a man in the

night while he sleeps, she'll ride him to death if she can" (Smith, p.45). At this point in her tale, Granny tells of Red Emmy riding Almarine and her effect on his physical appearence.

Granny and other neighbors begin to notice that Almarine is "looking poorly." He had come by the store for coffee, "all whitefaced and as thin as a rail. That boy don't look good...looks plumb tuckered out" (Smith, p.44), but Granny waits until Almarine asks for her help before she will devulge the magic formula to rid Almarine of Red Emmy the witch.

When Almarine finally begs for her help, Granny tells him he must "make the mark of the cross on her breast and her forehead...throw her out the door and say the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost as loud as ever you can" (Smith,p.46), and if she won't leave then, Granny instructs Almarine to "cut her...and make the mark of the cross with her blood." Of these folk beliefs, Thompson indexes collections in England, Ireland and Wales of tales of witches robbed of their powers by the making of the sign of the cross (v.3, p.304). As Granny asserts, however, "We ain't seed the end of it yet" (Smith, p.49).

Almarine throws Red Emmy out, and takes a new wife. But the folk know what to expect from a disappointed witch, or a fairy whose love is scorned. The Curse By a Disappointed Witch has been labeled Type 410 by Stith Thompson. Cross

indexes five sources of tales which tell of a fairy avenging herself on a man who scorns her love (p.257). Red Emmy, whether she be witch or fairy, is credited with being the cause of the misfortune which befalls Almarine Cantrell.

Almarine's cow sickens and is the cause of the death of both his new wife and his young son. The Davenports, another family on the mountain, help bring Granny to Almarine's place to tend the dead and dying. Almarine had found his cow "lying on her side with her belly distended and her large brown eyes already gone filmy and blank" (Smith, p.69). Almarine's wife, Pricey Jane has taken ill after drinking the cow's milk, and little Eli has died. The new baby, whom Pricey Jane was too weak to nurse, is the only member of the family left to Almarine. Granny pronounces "Dew pizzen" (p.71) on the cow and lays out Eli. She obliquely informs Almarine that the sickness and death had nothing to do with his stopping to play poker. Rather, it was the work of Red Emmy.

> "Hit ain't got nothing to do with yer poker,' she said. Hit all has to do with the cow. "That cow has eat in the holler before," Almarine said. "Hit ain't never took sick." (p.74)

George Gomme, in his book, Ethnology in Folklore, points out that there is a very close connection between witches and lower animals in folklore and that in Ireland, cattle

transformation was commonally attributed to a witch (p.50). Almarine and Granny must have thought so, too, because the matter isn't settled until Almarine rips the still-beating heart of the cow out and shoots it five times. This is another magical solution to break the curse of the witch. If the bewitched animal is killed, the witch who bewitched it will also be killed (Thompson, v.3, p.304). Almarine then "ran through the night toward Snowman Mountain screaming out like a crazy man, or like a man bewitched" (Smith, p.75).

In addition to the various folklore motifs brought out in this study, it should be noted that other touches of Irish influence are found in this work. The occupation of hunter, a very natural occupation for an Appalachian mountaineer, is shared by Almarine with one Finn Machumail (Finn McCool), an Irish folk hero whose exploits were compiled from more ancient texts around 1100 A.D. Fragments of these tales are extant in manuscript form, and Finn is generally accepted as having been a popular hero as early as the seventh century (Hyde, p. 379). In addition to their occupations, Finn and Almarine share physical characteristics. Finn's name means "the Fair," and he is the son of Chumail, an assasinated leader of the Fianna. This distinction places Finn in the minor nobility class. Almarine, Granny tells us, was "so pretty (as a child), with all that pale-gold hair" (Smith, p. 18) and "he had growed up into the finest-looking man... All that pale gold hair and them light blue eyes, and so tall and

straight" (p.26). At the age of twenty-two, Almarine owns all the land he can see from his cabin door (p.17); the owning of land has become an American mark of nobility.

Even their childhoods were similar in a way. Finn was raised deep in the forests with only two women to look after him and did not know the company of other boys until he joined a household and began warrior training. Almarine was also a solitary youth who came to know the mountains as his home, exploring Hurricane Mountain in places where no one else would go (p. 18). They each take women who are bewitching, or are bewitched, as wife but here their stories diverge. Finn's marriage is much more than Almarine's can ever be. Their mutual heritage is ascertained by Granny's statement that "...Van Cantrell (Almarine's father) ...brung that wife of hisn, that Nell, from Ireland with him" (p.19).

The rèference to ravens at and near the cave of Red Emmy, echo the raven form the Celtic wargoddesses assume in the Mythological Cycle of tales from Ireland. Emmy herself has very definite supernatural qualites, whether she belongs to the fairy race or practices the powers of a witch. Her very existance is something of a mystery. Granny can not say if she was the natural daughter of Isom Charles or if, as some folks say "he drempt Emmy up outen the black air by the Raven Clifts" (p. 38). What Granny does say, empathtically, is that Red Emmy was pledged to the devil.

The presence of the devil and Granny's reaction to Emmy,

whom Granny insists has been intimate with him, is an American motif (Christiansen, p.84). Along with the statement that this is a "true" story, the Devil motif and its setting, this tale is an example of an Irish folktale transformed by America's Appalachia. While Ireland and Appalachia both occupy an area which is geographically isolated, these two traditions did not grow up independantly. Rather, the American tradition has grown from the cuttings of the Irish culture which have been grafted onto the American stem.

This episode of Almarine Cantrell's personal history is in the form of a folktale, recited in a culture which reveres orality in much the same way that the Irish culture still does. Many of the motifs found in this tale are of Irish origin. The tale was written by a modern Appalachian fiction writer trying to capture the essence of a people in Appalachia near the beginning of the twentieth century. She chooses to cast her characters and her tale in a way which blends ancient Irish traditions with distinctly American traits, resulting in a tale which bears the markers of two cultures. It should be noted, however, that the author was unaware of the Irishness of this tale (see Appendix A). Although she considers herself to be of Scotch-Irish ancestry, she feels that the folktale contained in her novel is not attributable to any one culture. I would agree. The tale is both Irish and American.

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Appendix A Smith Questionaire.

This Questionaire was composed by the author of this paper and was presented to Ms. Lee Smith via mail. She responded, and the typed copy of her response is contained herein. The original in Ms. Smith's own handwriting is on file with the author of this paper.

1a. **How long did you live in Grundy, Virginia?** Until I went off for my last two years of high school- My mom just died last year, but my dad still lives in the house I grew up in.

1b. **What other states and cities had you lived in before writing Oral History?** Richmond, Virginia; Roanoke, Virginia (Hollins College); Tuscaloosa, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee.

2. **What was the ethnic mix of the population in and around Grundy? What ethnicity do you consider yourself and your family to be?** Appalachian; Scotch-Irish

3. **Can you isolate and identify your source material for the story of Red Emmy and Almarine Cantrell in Oral History?** Not now. I've heard many variations on the story of a "regular" young man entrapped by a witch, however.

4. **Was this information gleaned from remembered stories from your childhood, or was it obtained from oral histories which you have collected over the years?** Not from my childhood. I've heard three stories more recently- I think there's a variation in a book about North Carolina witch tales, too.

5. Have you at anytime studied folklore? No. If yes, where and with whom?

6. Did you deliberately use the marchen form, or did you write Red Emmy's tale as you thought it would sound if spoken orally? I'm not sure what marchen means, so the answer is no. I guess I was trying to reproduce speech as faithfully as I could in writing.

7. Are you aware of the folklore motifs used in Red Emmy's tale and could you identify and label them without the aid of secondary materials? No.

8. Have you at anytime studied Early Irish Literature or the literature of William Butler Yeats, John M. Synge, or other Irish writers who use folklore in their work? I love Yeats. I have read his poetry and studied it in college.

9. Can you identify any of the following without using any secondary material? No, except I remember some mention of Cuchulain in Yeats...vaugely.

Finn Machumail	Cuchulain
Lugh the Longhanded	Manannen Mac Lir
Dagda	Banshee

10. In your opinion, does the with lore found in Oral History belong to any one group and could you identify that group? No.